

REVIEWS

PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM. A Critique. By Paul Elmer More.
(S.P.C.K. ; 3/6.)

In this essay, reprinted from his book *The Catholic Faith*, a distinguished American Platonist gives us his estimate of Christian Mysticism, and especially of the type of mixed mysticism (as he describes it) developed by mediaeval Christianity and continued to the present day, the type seen, for instance, in St. John of the Cross (p. 8). It is by no means a favourable estimate. He remarks truly enough towards the end of his essay (p. 84) : ' It will be abundantly clear by now that I am writing in no spirit of sympathy with mysticism,' but he suggests that if his antipathy is judged unjustified, it will be by readers who know mysticism only through the genteel and sentimental presentation of it by popular expounders such as Evelyn Underhill. Ruthless—he says in effect—his criticism may be, but it is a criticism called forth by full knowledge and unprejudiced consideration of the facts.

The truth, on the contrary, is that it is impossible for Mr. More to know the facts. He is ignorant, apparently, of the philosophy and theology required for reading intelligently the mystics in question. This ignorance leads him to dismiss contemptuously as mere verbiage distinctions which are valid in fact, and in the eyes of the mystics of vital importance; or again gravely to misinterpret what they teach and then to set it in contradiction with the teaching of Christ.

Here is an example of his method (p. 54) : ' Oh, St. John is careful here to guard against the open heresy of teaching an essential union of the soul with God such as would place him with the pagan mystics. But what practical force, what significance of any sort, has this thin dividing word ' essence ' before the all-devouring, all-absorbing flame of Omnipotence? ' This thin dividing word ' essence ' ! We ask for thought, and are given nothing but the obsession of a verbal and spatial imagination.

Through failure to understand what such mystics as St. John mean by love of the creature, Mr. More is led to conclude that whereas Christ's Great Commandment was : Thou shalt love God *and* Thou shalt love thy neighbour, ' the law of theistic mysticism is : In order to love God thou shalt not love thy neighbour ' (p. 73). And when he finds St. Teresa saying ' the surest sign for discovering whether we observe these two duties

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[love of God and love of neighbour] is the love of our neighbour, since we cannot know whether we love God,' he can only remark that the mystic 'could even on occasion forget the bleakness of his mystical abstractions for a view which would be acceptable to the veriest humanitarian' and he exclaims: 'Blessed are such inconsistencies' (p. 78). We wholeheartedly agree with him when on another occasion (p. 52) he says: 'For one thing the word love is so terribly ambiguous.' It is indeed.

We are concerned only with Mr. More's treatment of genuine Catholic mystics. How gravely he misunderstands them is clear from his final criticism (p. 109): 'Christian mysticism . . . is connected with a craving for intensity of experience at the cost of clarity and sanity.' He has yet to learn the fundamental truth that their quest is no selfish quest for religious experience, that for them too the aim of life is the perfect doing of the will of God.

L.W.

LA PHILOSOPHIE DE NEWMAN, Essai sur l'Idée de Développement. By Jean Guitton, Agrégé de Philosophie, Docteur ès Lettres. (Paris: Bouvin; 30 fr.)

The favourable reception accorded some weeks back at the Sorbonne to the above thesis only shows how studies on religious subjects handled in a capable frank manner receive respectful sympathy. Psychology, historical research and philosophical criticism have been brought to bear with happy results on this work. Nevertheless something further is required to make a thesis a literary success: *nascuntur poetae*. M. Guitton is fortunate in being one of these.

At a time when Christian philosophers were rare, England at any rate could lay claim to one—this was Newman. If we except the first stir of emotion connected with his name, we must admit he was neglected. As he lived, however, to a very ripe old age, he witnessed a reaction in his favour, a tardy popularity which with men of his calibre is generally posthumous.

M. Guitton has taken for the theme of his essay, that idea which above all other impressed itself on Newman's mind and which led him eventually to leave Anglicanism in 1845—i.e., that of 'Development.'

Which was the Church of his day that could claim identity with Primitive Christianity? Furthermore, 'What *was* precisely that Church of the Fathers' that was taken to be the standard of religion at Oxford? True, she had altered from the days of Tertullian even to those of Athanasius, or to speak accurately—she had developed.